

The Star - Online

News and Advertising in the Grand Coulee Dam Area

09/07/2005

Tony Wilson back from Iraq

By: Scott Hunter

The army loves guys like Tony Wilson, and the feeling seems mutual.

At a time reportedly lean for armed forces recruiters faced with having to tell potential recruits they might be sent to the war in Iraq, Wilson just re-upped for stint number three - while he was in Iraq.

He's back in the states now, after six and a half months serving in Talafar, between Mosul and the Syrian border, a known major route for foreign insurgents entering the fray in which homemade, roadside bombs are a weapon of choice.



Tony Wilson, left, with Spec. Patrick McKay in Iraq.

That's where Wilson comes in, usually wielding a robot.

From two to seven times a day, Sgt. 1st Class Tony Wilson and a team of two other men would be called to get rid of some kind of bomb, usually an IED - Improvised Explosive Device.

Wilson is an explosive ordnance disposal technician with the 62nd Ordnance Company (EOD), stationed outside Tooele, Utah, at an incinerator designed to rid the world of nearly one half of the chemical weapons possessed by the United States. When something bad gets stuck in the machinery there, ordnance techs get it out. He'll be back on that job soon.

But last week, Luann Wilson's son, his wife and 1-year-old daughter sat in her living room overlooking Banks Lake.

Tony, a 1995 Lake Roosevelt High School graduate, looks like the soldier he is. Fit, tan, short-cropped hair, smiling and confident.

And tattooed. He's got one from every place the army has sent him, so there's a lot of ink in his skin, testament to his decision to shun college.

After a couple quarters of wasting his father's money at Chehalis Community College, Wilson was just responsible enough to admit he wasn't responsible enough to make it to class.

He left college and joined the army, which he highly recommends.

With a laptop full of photos and movies, Wilson is eager to show a visitor a few scenes from his life in Iraq.

He's put together videos of things blowing up, set to hard punk rock and echoing the adrenaline rush of the moment.

"It's not your everyday job," Wilson says, his wife and daughter in the next room. "Anytime you get to blow stuff up on a daily basis, it's a lot of fun."

Any boy who has ever lit a firecracker knows what that's about. But almost as good as the booms are the tools Wilson uses to stay safe. No Mission Impossible, last-second wire cutting.

The average cost of the robots army ordnance techs use is about \$80,000, Wilson says. Cheap compared to someone's life. But he's only lost a few of those very tough radio-controlled machines that typically place a charge next to an IED, then back off.

When robots won't work, firing .50 caliber armor-piercing rounds at the bomb often will. Picture a bullet as thick as your thumb, about eight inches long.

"We get a lot of really neat toys," Wilson says.

But it's not play. Included in his stories and photos are the records of trucks he was in, now mangled metal, hit by IEDs planted, perhaps, by enemies who knew he'd be coming.

Wilson says he prefers to get rid of an IED within an hour, and his team would often break up their routine, just to keep those who planted it from detecting a pattern they could use to kill them next time.

That problem, and the intensity of the work, are the reason for a relatively short tour in Iraq, Wilson says. If you're in country too long, it's too likely you'll get lax and slip into a pattern, watched by an enemy.

Unlike in Kosovo, where as an engineer Wilson would often investigate after a crude bomb or ordnance had exploded, in Iraq, troops face sophistication and planning by fighters whose bombs are "almost as good as ours," Wilson says. "It's very well made stuff. ... It's built by some guy in his basement, but it's built by an electrical engineer in his basement."

After his 14-day leave is up, Wilson and his family will head back to the relative safety and routine of the nation's front-line chemical weapons incinerator.